"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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Spiritual and Religious Values in Rural Art

HOLBROOK LIBRARY PACIFIC SCHOOL OF RELIGION

By Betty Eckhardt*

My first realization of the beauty of my farm home and of the fact that it probably was a very desirable place for a little girl to grow up came from reading the "Country Girl's Creed," which Jessie Field wrote when she was rural secretary of the Y.W.C.A. It had an amazing effect in making me conscious of the many lovely things in my every-day life. I would like to read it since I am greatly indebted to Jessie Field for my own conception of Rural Art.

A COUNTRY GIRL'S CREED

I am glad I live in the country. I love its beauty and its spirit. I rejoice in the things I can do as a country girl for my home and my neighborhood.

I believe I can share in the beauty around me--in the fragrance of the orchards in spring, in the bending wheat at harvest time, in the morning song of birds, and in the glow of the sunset on the far horizon. I want to express this beauty in my own life as naturally and happily as the wild rose blooms by the roadside.

I believe I can have a part in the courageous spirit of the country. This spirit has entered into the brook in our pasture. The stones placed in its way call forth its strength and add, to its strength, a song. It dwells in the tender plants as they burst the seed-cases that imprison them and push through the dark earth to the light. It sounds in the nesting notes of the meadow-lark. With this courageous spirit I, too, can face the hard things of life with gladness.

I believe there is much I can do in my country home. Through studying the best way to do my every-day work I can find joy in common tasks done well. Through loving comradeship I can help bring into my home the happiness and peace that are always so near us in God's out-of-door world. Through such a home I can help make real to all who pass that way their highest ideal of country life.

I believe my love and loyalty for my country home should reach out in service to that larger home that we call our neighborhood. I would join with the people who live there in true friendliness. I would whole-heartedly give my best to further all that is being done for a better community. I would have all that I think and say and do help to unite country people near and far in that great Kingdom of Love for Neighbors which the Master came to establish--the Master who knew and cared for country ways and country folks. -- Jessie Field

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Perhaps there are some of you who haven't heard Lorado Taft's famous story of the summer boarders who went out on the hillside on every clear evening to see the sunset. The little girl who lived on the farm watched them with great curiosity. She had never seen anyone who just sat and looked at the sky! When the boarders found that she was interested, they invited her to go with them. She listened to their exclamations on the variety of colors, the clouds, and the after-glow and finally made this pathetic remark, "You know, we didn't have any sunsets on our farm until you came."

There has been a significant development in the appreciation of country life among our farm women's club members in West Virginia. I am convinced that this is due largely to the songs they sing in their meetings and to the poems they included in their year books. Instead of the revival hymns such as: "Shall we meet beyond the river," or "Will there be any stars in my crown," they have turned to nature hymns:

"For the beauty of the earth,
For the beauty of the skies,
For the love that from our birth
Over and around us lies,
Christ our Lord to Thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful praise."

And also that fine old German hymn:

"All creatures of our God and King,
Lift up your heads and proudly sing,
Alleluiah!
Thou burning sun with golden beams,
Thou silver moon that brightly gleams,
Oh, praise Him,
Alleluiah!

"Dear Mother Earth who day by day,
Unfoldeth blessings on our way,
Alleluiah!
The flowers and fruits that on thee grow,
May they His glory also show,
Oh, praise Him,
Alleluiah!"

Surely the singing of such hymns will be reflected in the personality and life of the singer.

In looking over the year books for the favorite poem of the Farm Women's Clubs, I found this one called:

Beauty Blind

"The Maple boughs, as breezes pass
On summer afternoons;
Make shadow pictures on the grass--
She scours the silver spoons.

"The rose that grows beside her door
Is heavenly with bloom;
Pink petals drift across the floor--
She hastens for the broom.

"The brown thrush on the old stone wall
Will chant his soul away;
She does not hear his song at all--
This is her ironing day.

"The sunset paints the spacious skies
Oh, gloriously indeed;
But while the day in splendor dies--
She stoops to pull a weed."

Author unknown

One woman gave convincing evidence of the effect of this poem when she said, "You know, I just have to shake myself when I get all steamed up and can't see anything except work. I find I can get just as much done, and not mind it hardly, if I stop and look at something pretty once in a while.

Appreciations seem to be contagious. At any rate, most of us can trace the influence of some individual, or possibly a book, in the forming of our own likes and dislikes. I need only remind you of Liberty Hyde Bailey's "Holy Earth," or the poems of George Russell, or Allen Eaton's famous essay on "Woodpiles and Haystacks." Each of us could make a long list of those who have contributed to our appreciation of country life.

I would like to pay special tribute here to Nat Frame, former director of Agricultural Extension for West Virginia University. For twenty years, in spite of federal and state disapproval, he moulded the extension program according to the philosophy that "life is more than making a living."

If I were a rural minister, I think I would choose this for one of my texts: "Hold fast to that which is good!" In other words, without widening the breach between town and country folks, I would try to develop a consciousness of a distinct rural culture; a greater pride in being a farmer and an increased appreciation of rural life.

Rural neighborhoods, such as we have in the east and in the central states, are constantly in contact with urban influences. The tendency is for rural people to patronize, not only the town stores, but also commercial amusements and to neglect neighborhood activities, such as home talent efforts in music, dramatics and sports. The loss is inevitable unless the people themselves understand the value of creating at least a part of their own entertainment. I cannot emphasize the importance of this point too strongly. The education of adults and young people in this field, through discussion and study of leisure time opportunities in both town and country is a necessary foundation for a successful rural program. They must learn to choose only the best that the town has to offer, and cherish and develop those neighborhood activities that give opportunity for creativeness and self-expression.

There is very good advice in the old hymn which recommends that we "count our blessings." Country people might be much happier if occasionally they realized the supreme advantages of country life. Perhaps they need to be confined for a while to a very expensive city apartment in order to appreciate the freedom and luxury of having a whole house and a yard. They would know then the satisfaction of being able to sing or make as much noise as they please without considering the neighbors.

Perhaps one needs to have the disappointment of trying to raise a few plants on a fire escape, or see the sad little inhibited city dogs before one really appreciates the joy of contact with flourishing and virile plant and animal life.

A few days of inflicting repressions on children in a city apartment or on the streets should send country dwellers home with a feeling of greater satisfaction in even the simplest kind of cottage where a child can grow up naturally with a wealth of freedom, fresh air, and sunshine.

We sometimes feel that rural neighbors are a bit too curious. We would welcome their interest and kindly feeling, however, after living in an apartment where no one wants to get acquainted, or cares whether you live or die.

We have gone a long way in this discussion of the art of living without giving a formal definition of rural art. I like the one Allen Eaton gives in his essay on "Woodpiles and Haystacks." "Art is the doing, in the very best way, of

the thing that needs to be done." With such a broad definition, we might include not only the building of a fine woodpile, or a haystack, but the plowing of a field, the growing of a splendid pumpkin, or a fine herd of cattle, or a flower garden, or the making of an apple pie. Country people are supremely fortunate in their opportunity to create beauty. It will add much to the joys and satisfactions of their lives if we can help them realize that they are very near to the Creator, and have the privilege of making possible the expression of the most fundamental laws of life.

Perhaps some of you are wondering what bearing all of this sentiment may have on the general theme of "Rural Reconstruction." I will admit that it is a bit difficult to appreciate the bloom on peaches when they are selling for less than cost of production, or to get very enthusiastic about "farming as a way of life" just before a tax sale. The magnificent progress which the present administration has made toward planned agriculture should greatly reduce the number of economic tragedies.

The attention to the material side of agriculture is, of course, of great importance, but agricultural leaders must be reminded that prosperity alone will not bring happiness. Satisfactions come not from the amount of money we have to spend, but from our capacities for enjoyment in a varied field. There must be sufficient economic success, of course, to give a feeling of security and a reasonable standard of living. The need of increased income past this point diminishes, however, when people learn to find pleasure in simple things and realize that greater satisfactions come from active participation in leisure time pursuits rather than in spending money for the passive commercial types. Of course, there must be a balance between the two. It would be folly to miss the good things that come to us over the radio or in the motion picture halls just because they are commercial. It is certainly reasonable, however, to expect a person who has had a part in a play to more truly appreciate a fine piece of acting, or for a person who toots a horn to understand a fine symphony. We need many more amateurs in order to appreciate our professional artists. Country people have many talents in the broad field of art, which would give them greater satisfactions and happiness if they were encouraged to cherish and develop them.

There is an old Jewish description of immortality in which the prophet promises that "the righteous will live in a hundred different worlds." Surely that is the contribution that the development of rural art can make to the religious and spiritual life of country people who are particularly blessed by their environment. If we can develop our own potentialities and live as beautifully and completely as a bird or a flower, a tree or a fine animal; if we can encourage this development and the expression of every possible talent and worthy interest on the part of our country people, then we will approach "the abundant life" and truly live in a "hundred different worlds."